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Plan for restructuring the Bundeswehr

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During a press conference on 4 April, Germany's defence minister Boris Pistorius (SPD) unveiled a plan for restructuring the Bundeswehr. The proposals mainly involve structural modifications and are intended to boost the German Armed Forces' readiness to wage war (*Kriegstüchtigkeit*). They will be implemented by April 2025. The reform will cover the command structure, the branches of the armed forces, and the Federal Defence Administration. The Operational Command, which is responsible for carrying out operations abroad, will be combined with the Territorial Command, which deals with nationwide territorial defence. Thus, a single Operational Command of the Bundeswehr will be established to supervise all types of operations. The Cyber and Information Domain Service will be transformed into a separate, fourth type of armed forces (aside from the Army, the Air Force and the Navy), which indicates an increase in the importance of digitisation and the fight against disinformation. The Joint Support and Enabling Service and the Joint Medical Service, which so far have formed separate organisational elements, will be merged and supervised by the Joint Support Service Command. This area of responsibility will include the medical services, logistics, the military police, civilian-military cooperation and the Bundeswehr's central institutions. Plans have been made to improve the cooperation between the armed forces and the Federal Defence Administration; this is intended to facilitate the reinstatement of conscription in the event of a war. The target number of soldiers will stay at the current level of 203,000.

Commentary

- Although the announced restructuring of the Bundeswehr is intended to adjust it to the defence of the country and NATO as a whole, it does not apply to its military capabilities. Germany's National Security Strategy published in June 2023 (see '*Germany's first national security strategy: the minimal consensus*') serves as the formal point of departure for these plans. This strategy was the first ever document to clearly name Russia as a threat to Germany and its allies. Subsequently, in November 2023 the ministry of defence published the Defence Policy Guidelines in which it defined the defence of the country and of NATO as a whole as a priority, followed by supporting the stability of Europe's neighbourhood and contributing to the maintenance of the global order based on international law. The ministry is probably preparing a new Concept of the Bundeswehr which should also involve an update of the capability profile of the German Armed Forces following new commitments resulting from NATO Defence Planning Process.
- Most of the recent modifications to the direction of the Bundeswehr's development were introduced following the annexation of Crimea and Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014,

albeit with a longer-term perspective. The White Paper on German Security Policy and the Future of the Bundeswehr published in 2016 referred to Russia as a challenge rather than a threat. It was only in 2018 that the ministry of defence adopted a new Concept of the Bundeswehr in which the defence of the country and the Alliance was considered to be as important as participation in crisis management operations. Alongside this, the Bundeswehr's military capabilities were adjusted to the commitments adopted within NATO, although this did not envisage any thorough reform of its structure. The far-reaching transformation of the military, which has been ongoing since 2011 in order to transform it into expeditionary armed forces, provided a context for these modifications. The defence ministry had emphasised the need for further changes, including within the Bundeswehr's command structure, even before Russia's full-scale invasion; in 2021, it even unveiled specific proposals for these changes. However, following the parliamentary elections in autumn 2021, the new SPD–Greens–FDP coalition abandoned them (see '*The war in Ukraine: consequences for the Bundeswehr and Germany's policy in NATO*').

- The implementation of the Bundeswehr's transformation of its structure and its capabilities might be hindered by the lack of sustainable long-term financing. Thanks to the special fund for modernising the armed forces, Germany's defence spending will remain at around 2% of its GDP until 2027. This year, the regular budget funding (€51.95 bn) will be supplemented by around €20 bn from the special fund. However, the government has failed to present plans for the continuous funding of Germany's defence after 2027 at 2% of GDP, when the fund will be exhausted. Another problem involves the Bundeswehr's personnel shortage; it will be a challenge to raise the number of soldiers to the planned 203,000. If these challenges are not tackled, they may reduce the effectiveness of the Bundeswehr's restructuring and its ability to fully meet its commitments within NATO. The present ruling coalition, especially the Social Democrats (SPD), lack the political will to continue to strengthen the German Armed Forces. The increasingly dominant approach within this party views diplomacy as the principal element of an effective foreign and security policy (see '*The party of peace: the SPD is sending signals about the freezing of the war in Ukraine*'). It seems that defence minister Pistorius is the main proponent of the plan to strengthen the Bundeswehr, both within the SPD and the government as a whole. Without support from his party, as well as the Liberals' and the Greens' readiness to ensure stable defence funding at the level of 2% of GDP or higher post-2027, any further efforts to strengthen the Bundeswehr may be gradual and limited.